

UP SALT CREEK.

KATHARINE M. MELICK.

Did you ever follow a stream to its course, threading through willows and rushes, purple spider-worts and tall meadow-rue, turning down through the trough of a plowed field, and coming at last to a side hill, deep in weeds and shadow, where little trickling threads come through the brown sod? May be yours was a Stonehenge of sand, strewed in crumbling blocks about the bowl of the spring, with flat liverwort holding up cups of coolness, and thick mosses, like Axminster pile. It matters little whether the side hill, or the spongy marsh, or the shifting sand spring meet you at last. It is no longer undiscovered country. You stand like Balboa or Marquette, beholding a realm that is yours by primal and everlasting right. The cat-tails and alders nod to you as you go back, carrying a few blue-bells or twine of wild creeper, just as Columbus brought back some of the things he found on his island. You mark how the little "draw" widens, now, and the clumps of willows begin. How far will it be to minnows, and dragon flies, and lazy lily leaves? What kinship we might have with our ancient Mother of the Hills, if only the summer days were not ever hurrying us to hotter noons.

Some people smile at the name of our grey river. Some more people shudder at its white alkali bottom lands, its weedy bayous, when the rain pours down, and its salt-crusts basins when the rain is blown away in a tireless three days' wind. It is true that mills and sewers, dumping grounds and factory smoke, rag weed and tumble weed, offer few attractions, even to the discoverer, unless he be a psychologist looking for "specimens" in the flats. But follow Salt Creek away from the sewers and smokestacks; the artificial monstrosities with which men have tricked it, from the polar bears chained under its stunted box-eldars to the beach where strange sails are manipulated by stranger seamen, or a canal drags the sullen salt waves through "straightened" courses. Follow the stream before it has been lariat-ed and thrown here among the "civilized," who treat it as they treat the sachem when they put his tomahawk in a glass case and give him a paper collar and a Trilby tie to wear with his harmless feathers.

Only as far up the stream as the cool of a morning will take you, past the guard towers of the penitentiary, and the caves of apocryphal horse thieves, the river stretches its shade of cottonwoods and walnuts and oaks, through cornfield and level pasture. Here it sumbles at will, rough and ungainly perhaps, as it wrenches loose the fence posts strung over its banks, and heaps together meadow lands and plowed fields at every black look of the sky. But if it keeps the lunge of the buffalo, in its course through "eighty" and "quarter section," let us not be too down-hearted, we who do not have to rebuild the fences. For there is some thing here of primeval prairie which harrow and harvester, grinding over the land, can never tame.

In a great bend of the stream, where giant walnuts tower over tangles of wild grape and ivy, is a gray stone house by the river,—the oldest stone house in the county, it is said. Whether or no, it is certain that the dwellers here have builded their fences for the river to tear down, these more than thirty years, all the years of Nebraska, indeed, and some before that, when the caravans from north and from south of Dixie line poured over the muddy border and showed each other savagely over scarce trodden trails. They have watched through these square deep windows the deer feed at morning with the cattle by

Salt Creek. They have left the cattle, freed from rope and stall, while they fled over miles of the clear uplands, with the about of the Sioux ringing here, where the grape arbors stretch to the stream. That tiny white-haired, blue-eyed Frau, who reads "Feld und Fold" without a squint or a spectacle, as she rocks by the deep, square windows on a Sunday afternoon,—that little German Mutter can tell you more of Salt Creek history than any tome that the grey owls guard in our library on the university campus.

Tiny, bent Frau Kestner, it was little she thought of our Salt river half a century ago, in Coblenz by the Rhine. It was much she thought of America, as her small arms ached with the toil of harvest and her heart ached for the fater and mutter and Geeschwister—all gone to the new country across the sea. All, every one but the small Gertrud, left behind that her passage money might be saved to start the new home in the new land. It would not be long where corn grew like grass, and horses ran free for the catching, and no one was hungry,—not long before money would come from across the ocean to take Gertrud, too. Before two harvests a letter came that told of sixty bright thalers boarded by faeterchen and Gerhardt and Karl. A long letter wherein Karl described the big *plug* drawn by white horses, the plowshare with the wheel that was knife keen on its edge, and cut down through a thick matted soil "like many thicknesses of carpet"—long strips further than all the farms of Coblenz, laid end to end. This was the good machine that had earned much of Gertrud's passage money. But the money did not come. It was very safe in the little blue mug by the Bible on Mutter Kestner's shelf. Who could tell whether it would ever reach Gertrud if trusted to the long journey by land and sea? Already Gertrud must have earned half enough to pay the single fare for which the company would bring her all the way. Would it not be better to earn the rest by another harvest, and have the bright thalers safe against the wedding day?

Gertrud toiled through three harvests at twenty thalers the year, and guarded the bright pieces so well that there were five of them—the earnings of three months—to lend to a fellow emigrant, whom the dreadful sights and sounds and smells of steerage passage on a Company ship sickened almost to death.

But there were long weeks of storm and shipwreck, when the great mast was blown into the sea, and the ship drifted, drifted, "way round by the north." "I was so glad to see the land," the little lady says stopping her rocker by the window.

If one could only write Frau Kestner's accent and tone, which are clear and sweet as the bells that ring in Coblenz, and as unwriteable as the straight glance of her blue eyes. Touch the stone ledge and be sure that you are not dreaming, when she tells you how the Company, who had lost much money by the storm, put the little maedchen, with the other tempest-tossed wanderers, on board cattle cars where they huddled together, shaken and afraid, over miles of a new land, stranger some times than the sea. Look out on the bright verbenas and poppies where the humming moth flutters in the afternoon sun, as she tells you how the Sioux came down on the year of the great massacre of the North. If you know even a little of her story, you will ask, now, to see the grape arbor or the broods of growing ducks that gobble their meal for seven minutes without a pause, and then run, all agasp with the greedy supper, straight to their water trough, where they bury their bills deep, with smothered quacks. You

will lead the little woman to talk of chickens and turkeys, of the charms of her peaches and apricots, of young Karl's latest accomplishments with the clarinet, or of Freda's wedding day. For you will know how all the time she is thinking of the awful night when they fled through the storm until flight was no longer possible, and then huddled in the open plain, a handful of refugees, in the warpath of the Sioux. You will not wish those blue eyes to see again, by terrifying bursts of lightning, that set the world on fire, that rain-driven, pitiless prairie, the circle of open wagons, the towering form of Gustav Kestner, the guard who rode round and round the little camp the long night through.

Yet what are words? There is no way to put aside the living reminder—poor, scared, wild Sophie, who for seven years after that night, without speech or natural notion, rocked herself and turned scared eyes upon everything around her. The days and nights the little German wife and mother has spent by our turbulent river,—what days and nights they have been! Yet even those terrible memories bring back the strong Gustav, the master of the stone house by the river. No burden could still be so heavy, when his strong shoulder was put to it. Men who came to the forge by the stone house tell yet how he was the tallest man in the county, and how no one knew a horse's foot so well. You cannot but think of those broad shoulders as you look at the narrow, sloping ones of the Muetterchen. Narrower and more bent they are, for the fall from a high mow that crushed one of them, in the days when field work for the peasant maedchen had some times other rewards than the twenty thalers per year.

As the air grows cool, and Karl puts away his banjo and Freda stands in the deep doorway to say good-bye, you look at the stone house on its knoll in the river bend and think how many hands have been lifted to stay its stones in the old quarry whence Gustav bore them here to echo the roar of the rain-swollen waters, and the clang of the anvil by the door. The German recruiting officer, whom the mighty young smith fled; the armies marching north and south from Mississippi to the coast, threatening another Germany, and driving him into territories not yet enrolled under the troubled flag; the rough hand of the laborer, pushing small Gertrud from the heaped hay; the rougher hands of black browed emigrants in the hold of the wrecked ship, and most terrible of all, those of the wild chiefs down the stream. They are all crumbled into dust, those cruel fingers, and Frau Kestner's may lie gently, on a Sunday afternoon, on the pages of "Feld und Fold."

When the hurrying days move more sedately for us, we who have grown up by the salt stream may find time to explore the undiscovered sources of rivers that water our corn fields with the best tide of another world. When that quieter time comes, and, in the glow of discovery, we pluck our handful of reeds or flowers from the spring bank, perhaps we shall find other growths there than rag-weed and dusty sun-flowers, if we care to see.

Rummatism.

Mrs. Askins—What makes Mr. Modlin so sick?

Mrs. Modlin—Oh, he was out last night drinking somebody's health.—Town Topics.

He asked Gotrox for his daughter's hand.

What did Gotrox say?

That he did not intend to dispose of her in sections.—Town Topics.

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